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Transit and the Park Experience: Preservation, Access, Economics and Opportunity

by Beth Wilson

It rained hard on New Year's Day, 1997. Yosemite National Park in California had just completed another year of record visitation — more than four million people had come to experience the Valley, the majority of them in private automobiles.

As in previous years, parking difficulties and traffic congestion at times grew so severe that Park officials had been forced to close the entrance gates and turn away visitors. Tourists were seeing far more of their windshields than they were of Yosemite's spectacular Half Dome and Giant Sequoia groves.

Along with the steady rain, temperatures were warmer than usual that January, melting layers of dense winter snow. The resulting flood in Yosemite Valley lasted three days, raising water levels as high as 10 feet in some areas of the park. Befitting the setting, the flood was a natural process – nature setting its course. But ecological benefits for the land were an economic disaster for Park visitor operations. The Park lost roads and trails, utilities, buildings and campgrounds, shutting down access for more than three months.

What was widely described as a catastrophe, however might have been an opportunity in disguise. Time to stop. To step back. To rethink. Park officials and gateway communities suddenly had the chance to imagine and build a new park experience — an experience in which transit would play a key role.

Parks in the Balance

The National Park System (NPS) operates under a precarious mandate. Federal parks were established to protect unique natural resources and preserve national heritage for future generations to enjoy. At the same time, the NPS must ensure public access to these scenic treasures. The two obligations are actually at odds with one another. As the number of visitors grows each year, so does their destructive impact on the parks – cars, exhaust, lines of traffic, delays, paved parking lots – marring the very park experience the public seeks.

More than just scenery, the national parks are important extensions of community in many areas – economic generators in the travel and tourism industry and the local economies dependent on it. Wildlife-related tourism generates an estimated $60 billion a year nationwide. Hotels, campgrounds, restaurants, retailers and related industries are faced with a similar dilemma. They thrive on park visitors, yet these visitors threaten the very thing that feeds tourism. Hence, business and local governments, too, have a vested interest in finding better solutions to accessibility.

When Congress designated Yellowstone the first national park in 1872, the mode of access was horse and horse-drawn carriage. The era of rail followed, and with it increasing numbers of visitors from afar. Tourism drove business growth and the construction of hotels and new roads. Since the late 1920s, transportation systems in the national parks have been developed primarily for the private automobile. Cars gave visitors access to remote areas, flexibility in travel planning and personal space for recreation equipment. Today there are more than 8,000 miles of roads running through our national parks, many leading to the visitor to-and-from expansive parking facilities.

But the era of road building in the parks is over. The infrastructure is now at or beyond capacity. More than 287 million visitors traveled to national parks in 1999. The roads were designed to flow with the natural setting, contributing to a visual experience. They were never meant to carry today's car volume. Arriving with hopes of a park experience, visitors often find themselves caught in a parking experience. Many resort to parking on roadsides, damaging natural resources and creating hazardous conditions. Beyond an environmental impact, the cost of expanding roadways and parking facilities to meet demand is an enormous drain on site resources, which are already straining to address a backlog of deferred maintenance. Alternative transportation systems may provide less expensive and more compatible park access.

Federal Coordination

President Clinton highlighted the need for improved visitor transportation systems in the national parks in a 1996 memorandum. In response, the Department of the Interior (DOI) and the Department of Transportation (DOT) signed in 1997 a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that would guide their collaborative efforts in innovative transportation planning. This guidance emphasized the need to preserve and protect natural resources; promote energy efficiency; move people safely; and improve recreation, historical interpretation and tourism opportunities.

Under the National Park Service's Alternative Transportation Program five national parks have been selected for site-specific demonstration projects:

- Light-rail transit and an alternative-fuels shuttle bus system in Grand Canyon National Park;
- Coordinated ferry and shuttle bus service throughout Golden Gate National Recreation Area;
- A regional transportation system combined with an in-park transit and intermodal transportation circulation plans in Yosemite National Park;
- An integrated transportation system at Zion National Park that connects the park with the gateway community of Springdale, Utah; and
- A bus transit system in Acadia National Park grown out of local-level partnerhips and serving several gateway communities.

In addition, the two federal agencies are collaborating on a comprehensive study of transportation needs and alternative transportation systems in public lands. Expected to

be released in early 2001, the study will examine potential transit strategies at numerous NPS, Bureau of Land Management, and Fish and Wildlife Service sites, as well as suitable vehicles and funding opportunities. Results could support a current Senate bill (S. 690) authorizing $50 million dollars annually over the next five years through a new FTA Transit in the Parks Program similar to FHWA's Federal Lands Highway program.

Acadia: Successful Partnerships

Located on the coast of Maine, Acadia National Park encompasses more than 47,000 acres on Mount Desert Island and surrounding islets. Downeast Transportation, Inc., runs a nonprofit transit system in Ellsworth, Maine, a gateway community 20 miles outside the park. In the early 1990s, Downeast recognized a need for transportation for park visitors staying in area campgrounds. After securing interest, private campground operators and the park service campground were assessed fees, enabling Downeast to began a shuttle service to the island town of Bar Harbor in 1993. Requiring a $2.00 fare from passengers, initial ridership was low.

By the mid-1990s, summer traffic congestion on the island reached a level that had residents complaining to elected officials, and businesses fearing a loss of tourists. In 1996, the Mount Desert Island League of Towns met with park officials to discuss growing traffic problems. After a series of town hall meetings, The League, Downeast, and Acadia National Park applied jointly to the Maine DOT for Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) funds. Requiring a local match, community partners rose to the challenge. The four island towns each voted to approve proportional funding, with additional contributions coming from Friends of Acadia, a local park support organization, and island businesses through the Bar Harbor Chamber of Commerce. To these resources the Park added a portion of each visitor's entrance fee. Secured CMAQ dollars enabled Downeast to purchase eight propane-fueled buses, while the community partnership contributed funds to support operations and to hire a transportation consultant to guide the system's development and marketing.

Downeast launched a free summer shuttle service in the park and local communities in June 1999. Response to the Island Explorer was overwhelming. Ridership shot up 600 percent, with nearly 3,000 passengers a day riding the shuttles during the season's peak. The DOI estimates a reduction of 1.3 million vehicle miles from the park's roads during its first summer of operation.

To meet the growing demand, Downeast needed to add more vehicles. A second round of funding included competitive grant money from the Federal Highway Administration's Alternative Transportation program. During the 2000 tourist season, the Island Explorer served visitors and residents with an additional nine buses. Although park visitation was down, ridership continued to increase 40 percent.

"It's not a park operation," notes Tom Crikelair, previous general manager of Downeast and now an independent consultant on the project. "It's a community transit operation. We've had to cut some new pathways through bureaucracy."

Established working relations contributed to Acadia's designation as a demonstration park in the DOI-DOT memorandum of understanding. A multi-faceted support structure behind Island Explorer included input from all interested and affected stakeholders and an established transportation provider.
"Did we need to create a separate transit system for the park system? We all agreed that the existing Section 18 [grantee] was the best one to run the system," remarks Crikelair referring to Downeast Transportation, who also receives FTA 5311 Funds.

The Island Explorer runs on seven bus routes originating from the Village Green in Bar Harbor and spreading out to cover a large portion of Desert Island. The buses transport passengers to popular park destinations, campgrounds, and hotels, harbors and ferry terminals, and the airport, as well as to schools, post offices, and community centers.

The performance of and support for Island Explorer led in November 1999 to Acadia's designation as the test site for a new DOT Intelligent Transportation System. The ITS test project is implementing an Advanced Traveler Information System designed to provide visitors with real-time information on parking availability, bus arrivals and departures, weather updates and other related communications. The project provides $2 million to expand the island shuttle system, which could serve as a model for other public lands.

"It's the partnerhip," says Len Bobinchock, Deputy Superintendent of Acadia National Park, describing Island Explorer's success. "The system has to serve both the park and the community."

The planning engaged all parties with a vested interest, included campgrounds, hotels, and the Chamber of Commerce.

"And they, in turn, became some of the strongest promoters of the system," adds Bobinchock, who is already looking to the future, describing a vision of a statewide, resource-sensitive, multi-modal transportation network that could connect visitors to Acadia and other destinations through an intermodal hub, park and ride facilities, airports, and ferries. "Island Explorer is just the beginning."

Zion: The Way a Park Should Be
Like so many of the national parks, Zion Canyon in southern Utah had become a moving parking lot during the summer tourist season. With thousands of cars vying for only hundreds of parking spaces, some tourists spent their vacation circling for an opening. Others resorted to roadside parking, degrading natural resources and diminishing the Canyon's vistas.

But that was then. This is now. 2000. A new millenium. A new park — this one nearly car-free.

"There was an enormous, positive impact in taking cars out of the canyon," reports Kirk Scott, General Manager of Zion Canyon Transportation System at the close of the

system's first summer run. "It changed the noise, the pollution … the feel. This is the way a park should be."

The free shuttle bus service began in May of this year, the result of six years' planning involving NPS, FHWA, Zion National Park, McDonald Transit Associates, the Utah DOT, the community of Springdale, Utah and Congress. Zion National Park had made previous attempts at park transit, as early as the 1970s. But partnerships and perseverance came together in the 1990s. Working with the congressional delegation from Utah, Zion National Park officials secured earmarks through the DOI appropriations bill. DOI dollars provided capital investments for bricks and mortar and vehicles, and Zion set out to create a transit system for the park. Meanwhile, the town of Springdale, just outside the park entrance, was sharing similar problems with traffic and parking. Recognizing their symbiotic relationship, the Park and the city began a collaborative effort.

Springdale applied to the Utah DOT and won Transportation Enhancement (FHWA/Surface Transportation Program) funds in 1997 and 1998. As part of an integrated transit plan that extended the look of the park, the town created bus stops and shelters, cross walks and traffic calming islands. Interested in improvements to the economic environment and quality of life, businesses and citizens came on board.

With no local transit provider to draw on, the park system put out a nationwide request-for-proposal. The bid was won by McDonald Transit Associates. Arriving from Waco, Texas, to head the budding system, Kirk Scott began to assemble his transit team. Thirty propane-fueled buses christened with Zion Canyon Transportation System rolled out through the canyon on May 23. By season's end in October, ridership had risen beyond expectation, with 1.5 million passenger trips.

"A far greater experience is now really guaranteed for visitors to Zion, and that has spilled over into the community," says Glen Hill, town manager of Springdale. "They're staying longer and spending more."

With few exceptions, cars have been banned from the park. Visitors park at the new Visitor Center at the park entrance or in Springdale using both on- and off-street parking. They can then board the shuttle at the Center or the closest Springdale stop. The system consists of two routes emanating from the Visitor Center at the park's entrance. The northern line makes numerous stops throughout the canyon. The southern line runs into and through the gateway community. Operation costs are paid with a dedicated portion of the park's $20 entrance fee.

The transit system does more than just move people. It is an essential element in the park's conservation mission.

"It was important that the buses became part of the message, part of the story," explains Pat Shea, landscape architect with the National Park Service. "This is a great opportunity to rescript how visitors experience the park."

Yosemite: Bringing Gateway Communities on Board? Understanding the Larger Community?

During the worst days of the mid1990s, many visitors to Yosemite National Park never got past the entrance. The Valley had reached capacity and the gate was shut. Park officials had implemented a Restricted Access Plan, closing the entrance gates to the Park due to congestion levels and fierce parking competition. The only vista these tourists saw was a stream of gridlock. The closures and their media coverage, including international reports, caused confusion and concern and resulted in a drop in tourism. Local businesses dependent on tourist dollars suffered, and relations between the Park and its concessionaires and gateway communities were strained. Ecology and economies clashed.

Accommodating more cars was not an option. Land use limits prevented the construction of additional parking spaces. Widening roadways would be cost prohibitive and environmentally unsound due to steep terrain and fragile ecosystems.

But accommodating people was a top priority, both of the Park and the gateway communities. Access to the Park is vital to the economies of not only Park consessionaires but of the five surrounding counties. Four million visitors each year contribute some $3 billion to the local economy. If the Park Service strictly enforced its auto limits, the region stood to lose millions of dollars annually.

The Yosemite Area Regional Transportation Strategy group (YARTS) had its genesis in the early 1990s with a Memorandum of Understanding established among the Park Service, area county governments, Caltrans (California State Highway Department), the State Department of Tourism, the US Forest Service and, later, the Federal highway Administration (FHWA). The group came together with a common mission: to improve transportation service, reduce dependence on private autos, improve air quality and ensure the economic viability of the region.

The destructive flood in the beginning of 1997 offered a real opportunity to rethink circulation in the Park. A National Park Service study recommended road closures and reduced parking. The YARTS team conducted their own study, and brought surrounding communities to the table. The counties made it clear that most of their businesses depended on car traffic. Any mass transit options would have to ensure that visitors did not bypass their communities.

“We wanted to work together to come up with a solutions,” explained Marjie Kirn of Merced County Association of Governments. “To feel like [the gateway communities] have some control over access issues in Yosemite,”

Two area counties, wary of the YARTS project, and its perceived potential to ban automobiles in the Valley, withdrew their participation. The remaining YARTS Board, including the Park Service, worked with a business and citizen advisory committee to develop a coordinated mass transit system serving both Yosemite Valley and communities along Highway 140 and Highway 120E. The two feeder routes of the

Yosemite Area Regional Transit Service are operated by Yosemite Concession Services, local winner of a competitive bidding process. Both lines connect passengers with the Valley Shuttle looping inside the Park boundaries.

All parties are invested, making a financial contribution to the system. Using a portion of park entrance fees, Yosemite National Park provides a fixed subsidy to YARTS, which is supplemented by subsidies from three area counties. Mariposa County contributed funds for Year 2000 operations through a hotel bed tax, while Merced County provided CMAQ grant dollars. Mono County plans to contribute FTA 5311f money (funding for rural inter-city transit) toward 2001 service. YARTS' operations are also supported with farebox revenue, all of which stays with the transit operator. CalTrans provided DOT State Planning and Research funds to pay for bus stop and roadway improvements.

In an agreement with the Park, YARTS vehicles have certain privileges: priority access to the park that avoids lines at the entrance gates, elimination of the $300 vehicle entrance fee charged tour buses, elimination of park entrance fees for passengers, and permission to stop at key attraction points.

Buses began rolling through Yosemite Valley in May 2000, supported by the Yosemite Area Traveler's Information System (YATI), which uses changeable message signs, highway radio information, information kiosks, and a website (www.yarts.com) to provide real-time transit support. The YARTS system carried 30,000 one-way riders during the May-September summer run, eliminating approximately 9,8000 cars from the Valley.

Partnerships and Opportunities

Successful visitor transportation systems share one essential component: partnership. National Parks do not exist in isolation. While they are national lands, they are at the same time extensions of local communities. Their operations and their well-being impact not only the visitor experience but capital flows at the state and local level. Community transportation can play a role in facilitating the goals of all partners. In order seize service opportunities in and near national parks, Transit operators need to understand the multi-level transportation planning process.

TEA-21 provides $217 billion over six years for surface transportation programs, including many types of park projects. While some funds can be distributed directly to the local Park Service, most of these dollars flow through FTA and FHWA programs to the 50 states according to a formula. This makes the state an important partner. While regional MPOs are the designated planning bodies for urbanized areas of 50,000 or more residents, the national parks – typically set in less populated areas – participate in transportation planning at the state level.

Under TEA-21, metropolitan and statewide transportation planning processes develop a long-range (20-year) transportation plan and a three-year list of priority projects in the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP). The NPS develops its own priority list of

projects to be funded through the FLHP program. Metropolitan, rural and park TIPs are integrated into the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP).

These planning provisions mean that national parks can influence state and local decision making, becoming additional forces in funding allocation. Access to state-distributed funds is crucial to the NPS goals of reversing environmental degradation, facilitating the circulation of visitors and improving the park experience. Funding opportunities will require partnerships with local stakeholders, and coordinated planning that integrates the needs of surrounding communities.
New or expanded opportunities under TEA-21 include:

- Increased PRP funds and expanded eligibility requirements for projects providing access to and within a national park, and for transit facilities in the parks.
- Funding for transportation projects aimed at environmental protection and preservation through the Transportation Enhancement (under STP), Clean Fuels, Scenic Byways, and Recreational Trails Programs.
- Increased CMAQ funds for public transit investments aimed at improving air quality.
- Authorization to use NPS appropriated funds and FLHP funds as the local match for many types of federally funded transportation project.

Moving Forward: The Future Park Experience
The National Park Service has adopted the motto: Visit Your Parks, Experience Your America. And this experience, increasingly, involves transit alternatives to the private automobile. The role of public and community transportation in National Parks parallels its capacity in our cities, towns and neighborhoods.

Just as public and community transportation add to the livability of the communities in which we live, they also add to the experience of our nation's most precious parks. And transit's impact on economic development is essentially the same for National Park gateway communities as it is in the rest of the nation.